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## The Wife of the Career-Oriented Submariner in Mid-Life Transition

### Abstract

Anthropological field research among the submarine associated community of the United States Navy on Oahu, Hawaii resulted in the conclusion that the wife of a career-oriented, senior submariner experienced a mid-life transition when she was between the ages of thirty and thirty-five. The transition was typified by attributes commonly associated with mid-life passage and was also associated with increased responsibilities of the traditional role the woman was expected to play, completed family size and increased leisure time, and ambivalence toward the husband's time-consuming position as well as toward her reflected status. This paper presents case study material to illustrate these characteristics and places the mid-life transition in point of time; varying resolutions are also presented.

# The Wife of the Career-Oriented Submariner in Mid-Life Transition<sup>1</sup>

Alice Ivey Snyder<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

A wife and husband rarely undergo mid-life transition at the same time. Instead, one spouse is most often stable and secure while the other works through her/his process of self validation and redefinition. Within the submarine associated community of the United States Navy in Hawaii, mid-life transitioning follows this pattern and the passage occurs for the wife when her husband is well into the second half of his twenty to thirty year naval career. At that time the male is in a steadied life pattern, is relatively successful, satisfied and not in the emotional throes associated with his impending military retirement. The female, on the other hand, frequently is at real dis-ease and must work diligently to re-achieve her own stability.

Submariners' wives over the age of thirty have been well socialized into the life style of the community for a number of years with but few exceptions. They, therefore, provide a readily defined population which can be studied in terms of mid-life transitioning and contribute to the body of knowledge concerning this period of readjustment for women. The purpose of this paper is to describe the mid-life passage, or crisis, or transition, for the wife of the career-oriented senior submariner, noting its most salient aspects.

The question is, how does the submariner's wife face and tran-

it through the stocktaking period which marks her acceptance of herself as no longer young?

#### Definition of the Mid-Life Transition

Sometime during the middle years of life one shifts from regarding her/himself as young to seeing her/himself as mature. According to Jung (1933), in this transition in life stage from young maturity to middle age we see "a significant change in the human psyche is in preparation" (104). Erikson (1968) notes that all life stage shifts are defined by marked change; he applies the term "crisis" to these periods, using the term "in a developmental sense to connote not a threat of catastrophe, but a turning point" (96). In other words, a mid-life crisis, or transition, requires some measure of upheaval in one's life with the end result being either positive or negative change.

The content of this mid-life transition is generally recognized. Introspection and stocktaking (Neugarten, 1970:77), and disillusionment, which is the weeding out of invalid or no longer applicable illusions (Levinson, 1977:107), are involved, as well as a growing realization of a time squeeze (Gould, 1972:526) which may be either between generations or a sense of having been trapped. One may experience a change in time perspective from chronological to situational, contextual time; s/he may be forced to face her/his own mortality (frequently triggered by the death of a parent or terminal illness of a friend). One is in turmoil, has a sense of aimlessness or purposelessness, and seeks more than just survival, to be less fragmented, to be more comprehensive

and integrated. The mid-life transition is the opportunity for the validation of self for self rather than the validation of self for others.

The age at which mid-life transitioning occurs is commonly held to center between the ages of thirty-five and forty-five, with Butler arguing for thirty-five (1975:2390), Gould, forty to forty-three (530), Levinson forty to forty-five (107), and Neugarten, prior to the mid-forties (102).

#### Review of the Literature

Unfortunately for the study of women undergoing mid-life passage the literature on the passage has focused on the white, middle class, urban, male American (Wachowiak, 1977:376), and few studies provide data on the female between the ages of thirty-five and forty-five.

Levinson's work (1974, 1977), is based on forty urban, predominantly middle class males, and the Grant Study (Vaillant, 1977) deals only with Harvard educated males in mostly urban settings. Gould makes his conclusions from a group of psychiatric outpatients between the ages of sixteen and sixty in Los Angeles whose sex was not noted, and from a normal sample where women were disproportionately represented in the forty-five plus age group, and were, therefore, largely beyond the period of mid-life transition. Neugarten's work with men and women in the urban midwest has a lower age limit of forty and thus catches only some of her group within the transition period. Lowenthal, Thurnher,

Chiriboga, and associates (1975) have a San Francisco area sample with a subgroup of twenty-seven women with the mean age of forty-eight.

For a wholly female sample within the specified thirty-five to forty-five age bracket, there is only Sheehy's review (1976:208-210) of the twentieth reunion booklet of the Radcliffe class of '54 which gives indications that many women had acted upon a mid-life crisis prior to the age of forty.

#### Methods

Participant Observation. Anthropological field research was carried out during 1976-1977 among the submarine associated community on Oahu, Hawaii. The investigator had lived within the communities of submariners and their families in Hawaii, California, Connecticut, Japan, and the Philippines for over twelve years, and spent nearly twenty-one months "in the field" related to this study.

Interviews. Interviews were conducted with over one hundred twenty wives. Ten women were subjected to five to six hours of structured interviewing, and lengthy, unstructured interviews provided material from more than fifty women. Brief interview schedules resulted in additional data on over nineteen commanding officers' wives, sixteen executive officers' wives, forty-four other officers' wives, seventeen chief petty officers' wives, and fifty-seven other enlisted wives. Over thirty-eight officers, ranging in rank from Ensign to Vice Admiral participated as did twenty-six enlisted men rated from Seaman to Master Chief Petty Officer. Medical staff, chaplains, and

other representatives of formal avenues of support were interviewed.

Questionnaires. A series of questionnaires were administered to over three hundred women. They included a survey with demographic material, Thematic Apperception pictures, and sentence completion; a coping skills inventory, life stress events inventory, a future autobiography where the client extrapolated her life to the age of eighty, and a personal attributes questionnaire. A survey was distributed to medical personnel treating the population.

Logs and Diaries. Five women between the ages of thirty-three and thirty-six maintained logs or diaries for from six months to a year, recording both interactions with other women and their emotional cycling.

Co-Therapy. The investigator and a Navy psychiatrist conducted marital cotherapy with one career submariner and his wife.

Microattentiveness. Following the lead of Jules Henry (1963) in his naturalistic observation within families under normally occurring circumstances, eight submariners' families were observed in their homes. Four officers' families and four enlisted men's families participated and the investigator spent six to nine days in each home, both with the husband home and husband at sea. The activities of the household were noted in detail and numerous interaction segments were videotaped.

The conclusions which follow were drawn from the material collected by the methods discussed above.

### Background

Total Hawaii based population attached to submarines, supportive staffs, and their families is estimated to be between 20,000 and 25,000. The community's total age range for married couples is from sixteen to fifty-seven with most between the ages of twenty and forty. Husbands and wives are usually within three years of the same age.

The submariner's wife expects her husband to spend up to 80 per cent of his time on sea duty. The enlisted man will probably retire as a Chief Petty Officer, an enlisted designation which must be distinguished from a commissioned officer rank, at the age of thirty-seven to forty for a twenty year career man, or forty-seven to fifty for a thirty year career man. The commissioned officer, because of his college education, will retire when he is approximately four years older than his enlisted counterpart and will be either a Commander or a Captain.

Only commissioned officers can aspire to becoming the commanding officer of a submarine; this is regarded as the culmination of one's naval career if an officer. This achievement occurs after thirteen to fifteen years of service, and command is awarded to only 20 to 25 per cent of those men who began officers' submarine training.

The submarine commanding officer, or CO, is the epitome of Levinson's BOOM, or *Becoming One's Own Man* (1977:105) where goals are "to become a senior member..., to speak more strongly with one's own voice, and to have a greater measure of authority.....This is a fate-

ful time in a man's life. Attaining seniority and approaching the top rung of his ladder are signs to him that he is becoming more fully a man (not just a person, but a male adult). However, his progress not only brings new rewards, it also carries the burden of greater responsibilities and pressures." The CO is the senior man on board the submarine and has the honor and associated ultimate responsibility for that sophisticated piece of equipment and the seventy to one hundred forty crew which mans her.

The submariner's wife has traditionally been expected to be a supportive helpmate who is capable of managing the separations from her spouse and all this implies. As her husband achieves seniority, this is reflected onto her; often when he is at sea, she is her husband's representative both socially and in more practical situations. For example, the CO's wife would be expected to attend the formal Change of Command ceremonies which mark the transfer of the submarine from one commanding officer to another even if her husband were away. She also would be contacted by the submarine support staff to disseminate important information to other crew members' wives.

If there are difficulties among the crews' wives, it is the senior submariner's wife who is contacted to lend assistance based both on her experience and expertise, and because her seniority lends weight to intercession in the military context on the junior wife's behalf. A senior submariner's wife has "earned her spurs" and is accorded respect in her traditional role, whether she is the wife of an officer or of an enlisted man.

### Case Histories

As has been noted, the traditional role assigned to the wives of successful senior career submariners has been that of Super Mother to younger wives, the source of information for problem resolution, and, frequently, their husband's representative when he is at sea. Unfortunately, it is sometimes the case that these increased responsibilities for the wife are the straws to break the proverbial camel's back.

One extreme case is the following.

A thirty-four year old woman had been married thirteen years to a submariner soon to take command. He was experiencing some personality conflicts on the submarine with which he was currently serving, there were many extended at sea periods, they had two small children, and the wife was worried and simply not managing.

Through the years the woman had been able to handle her own stress concerning her husband's career and the separations plus have energy left over to give to many military associated activities. But, as the husband's seniority increased, the wife found she simply could not manage her own problems and the problems of all the other wives who were supposed to contact her for assistance. She was known to be competent and sympathetic and wives came to her all too frequently with their own difficulties.

She became very depressed and lost weight, lost interest in her normal projects, had sleep problems, and she recognized the radical

change in herself. Fortunately, she sought the assistance of a psychiatrist. Her husband was at a loss as to how he could help her as his time and energies were consumed by his job. He said, "I have nothing left to give you and the children." He could not understand why she no longer appeared to cope.

Over a period of several years the woman was able to work through her crisis although it was a painful process. The result was a radical reorganization of priorities and profound self redefinition. The woman saw the crisis as precipitated by her playing the traditional senior submariner's wife role, and, in that role, "I'm symbolic to other people; I'm supposed to be strong and field problems for other wives." She also recognized that the distress she had experienced was not due to frequent separations or inadequate coping patterns but, rather, to the implications of the life style itself at her particular developmental period of life, as well as her own unique life history which included delayed grief work and a sense of not having met the expectations of demanding parents.

The woman's resolution required a drawing away from the traditional role playing and a deeper commitment to her position in the civilian community, her church, and acting upon years old educational aspirations.

The husband went on to command of a submarine.

Women in their thirties have usually completed their family size in this population and most utilize efficient means of contraception or they or their spouses have had surgery to prevent the

woman becoming pregnant. There are no sanctions against placing young children into readily available military child care or into preschool programs. The result is that the senior submariner's wife has increased leisure time, much of which is spent while her husband is out to sea; there is time to reflect and reconsider one's role in life.

For example, the thirty-two year old wife of a Chief Petty Officer had been married for fourteen years and had three school age children. During one at sea period of her husband, she became quite depressed and cried almost continually for five weeks; no one really seemed to need her much. She did begin to improve over the course of several months until she had worked through her stocktaking to the point where she sought and obtained a part time job. She also made several careful furniture purchases. These were momentous, signal, independent decisions for a woman who had consistently before depended upon her husband's opinion and regarded herself only as a wife and mother.

Another woman, thirty-four, had two young children. She realized, with both in school, preschool and elementary, that she had the opportunity to act upon long delayed ambitions. She rigorously researched and evaluated her choices for action; law school was her top priority. She took the time to investigate the implications of each item and how it would coordinate with her husband's upcoming transfer. Then she acted. This was a mild crisis confrontation; a mild transition and resolution.

The senior submariner's wife has many responsibilities, has completed her family, has leisure time for reflection, and also can

harbor resentment of time her husband spends at sea, or, when in port, at work on the submarine. The husband's stature is met with ambivalence for it implies increased time at work and increased responsibilities. The husband returns home spent and this may result not only in feelings of jealousy in a woman but can cast doubt upon her adequacy in meeting her spouse's needs. One thirty-four year old wife said, "I think he's more married to that big grey whale than to me!"

The husband's seniority and his relative success are achieved while the wife only shares this in reflection; hers is an ascribed status. In illustration, the thirty-six year old wife of a commanding officer said, only half in jest, "Don't call me Sue Anne, just call me Mrs. CO."

If the woman combines her ascribed status with a sense of having given up her career to have no other roles than those of housewife and mother and Navy wife, then the choice can begin to chafe.

One especially biting commentary is the following:

As for me, his career and mine were incongruous from the start, so I never amounted to anything. After all, how can you expect to land a decent job with two months notice on orders and no control over your destination. I might even resent my husband for having cheated his family for all those years, except that I haven't the heart....I have had to sacrifice my life to his, and...I resent the menial wifey chores we're given to do. I feel that I have great potential but I am not able to direct it toward any constant goal since our life is always "up in the air."

Significant life events occurring off time can contribute to the severity of a transition period. One thirty-four year old wife

who had been married almost sixteen years was distressed because her husband, who had been in the Navy for eighteen years, had not been advanced to Chief Petty Officer. He had taken the requisite exams for eight years straight, had letters of recommendation, but had never placed high enough to be selected. It was a severe strain on the entire family as they awaited the results of the selection board for the ninth year. A second, unexpected event, the violent death of a parent, served to intensify emotions, and the woman worked and re-worked her life repeatedly. Although she did not act out her sense of confusion was very evident. Finally the husband was promoted, she rapidly did her grief work, and resolution was rapid.

#### Discussion

Submariner's wives cope very well with what is a potentially stressful life style. They deal with their husband's absences and concomitant increased responsibilities and also learn to balance themselves, somewhat precariously, as dependents of a total institution of which they are not members.

These women experience two periods of non-coping behavior. The first period is those initial sessions when the husband is at sea and the young wife is not yet socialized into her role as submariner's wife; this period usually lasts no longer than a year. The second period, years later, is associated with the characteristics of the mid-life transition as well as the fear of not being able to manage the life style any longer. As one woman said, "I don't think I can do this one

more time."

Most of the women who were observed facing such transitioning were between the ages of thirty and thirty-five, although a few were as young as twenty-six. A very few were approximately forty to forty-five but theirs was a special case of the same phenomenon to be discussed below. Significantly, of all those women who were specifically evaluated for this passage, there were none who had not undergone the experience, officers' wives and enlisted men's wives alike. Many did not cognitively recognize and label what they were undergoing but all could describe in detail the process of and their sense of the transitioning they were experiencing.

Transitioning and Retirement. The most distinctive feature of the mid-life crisis among submariners' wives is that the woman faces and resolves her crisis prior to her husband's retirement. At twenty years retirement, when he is between thirty-seven and forty-four, he is certainly capable of making an entirely new career before retiring a second time. Even if the man stays in the military for thirty years, he is still distinctly in his midlife period when he leaves the service. McNeil states it succinctly: "Retirement is a misnomer...it is rather a change of career at middle age..." (1976:257).

This mid-life career change of military retirement is often disruptive and surrounded by problems. The retirement occurring at the approximate time posited for male mid-life transition is, in all likelihood, the major reason for disruption. Berkey (1972), Berkey and Stoebner (1968), Greenburg (1966), McNeil and Giffen (1965, 1967), and

McNeil, among others, discuss the implications of military retirement for the men, their wives and their children.

Wives of most military men are aware of the problems and upheaval which may be associated with their husband's retirement, and submariners' wives perceive that they must confront and resolve their own mid-life passage before the retirement period and be stabilized in order to minimize the difficulties connoted by retirement from the military, career change, and frequent attendant loss in status for the male. There is no altruistic motive implied by the woman facing and resolving her midlife crisis prior to her husband's retirement; perhaps it is even selfish. The family simply cannot support the upheaval of her crisis and his retirement at the same time. If the wife desires to act upon her stocktaking, she must do so prior to her husband's retirement and while he is stable in order to ensure that the family can ride out the confusion it must face. Indeed, the success and stability which the husband is enjoying may well contribute to the wife's sense of dissatisfaction.

Post-Command and Transitioning. A special case must be argued for the wife of the commanding officer of a submarine. Command at sea is the sought after goal of a career naval officer, and it is a one time, peak experience with great status and heavy responsibilities and much power. However, post-command is very different.

The submarining folklore is replete with stories of the emotional letdown following the command at sea tour. One bitter joke indicates that post-command officers are only good as Pentagon janitors.

The wife of the submariner CO is cognizant of the implications of post-command doldrums as well as of retirement from the Navy and she is pressured toward crisis resolution prior to the post-command period. Her husband will require substantial support and nurturance, or so the folklore says, and many post-command men will attest to it.

Detachment From the Military Context. In association with scheduling the woman's mid-life transition to precede the husband's pending retirement or post-command tour is a necessary space creating maneuver in roles. Greenburg (488-489) notes that the woman most subject to emotional problems at her husband's retirement is one who, among other things, places great stock in her role as a military wife. Thus, those women who seek additional education, start careers, begin new ventures, and, concomitantly, begin refusal of traditional role associated activities, are, in actuality, beginning the separation of themselves from the military as well as resolving their mid-life transition.

As for the case of the wife of the commanding officer, the wife pulls away from many military activities in order not to be riding high when the husband is gearing down. This would explain the resolution activities of the thirty-five year old CO's wife who had been extremely active in many military social affairs and then had nothing to do with any of the wives' club's functions. It also explains the post crisis thirty-seven year old wife of a post-command officer who was preparing to retire, who herself cancelled all her Navy associated activities and began a full time commitment to becoming a professional painter.

False starts as resolution of the mid-life crisis do occur.

For example, one thirty-five year old woman and her husband decided to begin a "second family" when their other child was ten. Then she purchased a small business and found that resolution more satisfying. It was also preparation for her husband's retirement for he will join the business; and it created space between the woman and the submarining life style.

These are examples of anticipatory socialization, "the process of learning the norms of a role before being in a social situation where it is appropriate to actually behave in the role" (Burr, 1972:408). In terms of traditional role expectations, these wives were behaving inappropriately, but they were, at the same time, definitely transitioning into new roles they expected to maintain after their husbands retired.

Deferral of Transitioning. Levinson (1977:107) asserts that deferral of a crisis will result in a more difficult passage when the crisis is finally faced. In this particular sample, the only cases obtained for lengthy deferral and consequent facing of the mid-life crisis were of women whose husbands were outstanding successes in the Navy and were thirty year career officers. One mid-forties wife of a senior officer who was questioned got tears in her eyes and said, "I always regarded myself as very strong, not emotional, but when my daughter, the youngest child, went away to college, I just stopped living for a while." Her mid-life crisis, by the process of deferral, came approximately ten years later than other submariners' wives, and she associated it with the empty nest syndrome, but it did not appear

particularly difficult for her to deal with.

Another wife of a thirty year career man deferred because of a large family with the last child being born while she was in her mid-thirties. When she felt able to leave the family, and her husband had shore duty and could support her by assuming increased responsibilities for the family, she returned to college for advanced degree work. She then sought a part-time position which would mesh with her other roles and admitted it was difficult. However, the deferral of her crisis did not intensify her reaction.

Although the supportive evidence is not as yet extensive, for this group of women it can be concluded that extended deferral does not necessarily imply a more difficult passage.

Transition Resolution. It was obvious that transitions were dealt with and managed well in this population, probably in part because of the requisite coping skills needed to deal with the stresses of the life style. Few women were encountered who had severe problems in meeting their mid-life and resolving them.

Most women deal with their self definition issues entirely by themselves. Others turn to a Women's Counseling Project (conceived and run by the wife of a submarine commanding officer who has recently retired), Parent Effectiveness Training, or Adlerian based family counseling (the latter two programs are offered on base or in military housing areas), and extrapolate to meet their personal needs. A few seek professional help from civilian mental health caregivers as no military mental health care is available. Some seek assistance through

reading or talking with friends. Or they talk with their husbands when home from sea.

Extreme acting out is rare with alcoholism and extramarital liaisons being seen but seldom. A limited number of women return to active church-going or achieve a "born again" type of faith. This is reflective of the life style where parameters of appropriate behavior are clearly prescribed to conform to white, urban, traditional middle class standards.

#### Summary and Conclusions

All submariners' wives studied were affected by mid-life transitions but in varying magnitude. Their ages ranged from a low of twenty-six to a high of forty-five with the vast majority of cases centering between thirty and thirty-five. Whether this is a sample which experiences the transition earlier than the civilian sector cannot be assessed for there is not enough concrete information to establish a base age for a comparable group of women not married to career military men. It may be that most women experience this passage between the ages of thirty and thirty-five or it may be that this particular group experiences the passage earlier as adjunct to their husband's earlier career onset and retirement. This issue merits further, careful consideration.

All mid-life crises for the sample occur prior to the husband's military retirement and may well occur when they do in order for them to be worked through before the impending upheaval of retirement of the

husbands, although a causal relationship has not been established.

Characteristics of the transition seen in the majority of cases, and illustrated herein by case histories, are a dissatisfaction with the increased responsibilities the husband's senior position implies for his wife, completed family size and associated increased leisure time, and ambivalence towards the husband's need to spend many hours at his job and away from home as well as resentment toward the woman's ascribed status. The transition period is typified, as well, by the features commonly attributed to mid-life passage and is aggravated and shaped by the life style and the woman's own unique life history.

The submariner's wife deals well with her passage into maturity with rare exception; this is due in large measure to her years of practice in managing potentially stressful situations and her development of a battery of coping skills which can counteract stress in one's life.

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FOOTNOTES

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<sup>2</sup>Alice Ivey Snyder, is Principal Investigator for the above Office of Naval Research sponsored project and was Research Sociologist at the Mental Health Clinic, Naval Regional Medical Clinic, Pearl Harbor, at the time the data were collected.